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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000317

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SUBJECT: MEERA SHANKAR SLATED AS NEXT INDIAN ENVOY TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

11. (SBU) Media reported on February 19 that the GOI has selected the Indian Ambassador to Germany Meera Shankar as the next Indian Ambassador to Washington. The same stories also reported that MEA Special Secretary Sharat Sabharwal will go to Islamabad to replace Satyabrata Pal, who is due to retire at the end of this month. MEA Joint Secretary Gaitri Kumar confirmed to PolCouns that the GOI has sought agreement from Washington for Shankar's appointment.

12. (SBU) The selection of these two envoys represents a departure from existing policy, which was to defer such appointments until a new government is in place after the April-May parliamentary elections. It appears that Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who is also acting Prime Minister, felt that these posts were too important to lie vacant for long, especially at this time of regional tension, a new Administration in Washington and international financial turmoil.

A Classical Nehruvian Bureaucrat

13. (C) Meera Shankar would be the second female Indian Ambassador to the United States - the first was Nehru's sister Vijay Lakshmi Pandit in the 1950s. According to political contacts, Shankar is seen as the "consensus choice" of the MEA and the Congress Party's political leadership. Shankar is a career member of the Indian Foreign Service and is highly regarded among her Foreign Service colleagues. MEA Joint Secretary (Americas) Gaitri Kumar told PolCouns that Shankar's appointment was "too good to be true," noting that her close ties to 10 Janpath (i.e., Sonia Gandhi) and range of diplomatic experience would help to advance the bilateral relationship. The Embassy worked closely with her from 2003-2005 on the strategic issues dialogues that would later become the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP). She was seen as a consummate professional as well as a realist who kept a tight focus on where India's interests lay vis-a-vis the U.S.

14. (C) There are varying views of Shankar among Delhi's foreign policy chattering classes. She is viewed by many as articulate and straightforward, but embodying the "classical Nehruvian" foreign policy perspectives which resist close

embraces with any of the great powers and seek Indian leadership in the developing world. Hindustan Times Senior Editor Pramit Pal Chaudhari observed that she is a "standard member" of the Indian Foreign Service establishment, "a hardworking, silent doer who follows what the MEA dictates." Chaudhari believes that she is a lackluster choice for the Washington post, noting that an "independent, innovative and high profile" diplomat would have been a better choice to work with the Obama Administration. Other contacts highlighted Shankar's diplomatic credentials and her "strong consensual and very knowledgeable" approach to resolving heated disputes. Sanjay Kapoor, Editor of HardNews, pointed out that she was one of the GOI officials who initiated the Indo-Pak composite dialogue on CBMs in 2004. In the wake of 2000 anti-India riots in Nepal, Shankar led bilateral negotiations to calm tensions, he added.

Biographical Notes

15. (SBU) Meera Shankar is a senior member of the Indian Foreign Service. Prior to her current assignment as the Ambassador to Germany, she served as Additional Secretary responsible for UN and International Security (2004-05) and as Coordinator for Counterterrorism (2003-04) at MEA. She also served as a Joint Secretary of Nepal-Bhutan and SAARC divisions from 1997-2003 and was Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations from 1995-1998. From 1991-1995, she was Minister of Commercial Affairs at the Indian Embassy in Washington. She had a long stint as a

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Director in the Prime Minister's Office (1985-1991). She is married to Ajay Shankar, who is currently serving as Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

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